TIMES *2* ANALYSIS

Is it riddled, in short, with secret wisdom? (3,5,9)

**Crossword editor
Mike Laws explains the
lure of the grid, and how
to do The Times's puzzle**

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Mike Laws in his local: "If I can't invent a clue in a pub, how can I expect it to be solved there?"

Provided you enjoy wordplay, such as that which makes many jokes funny, you have the basic mental equipment for solving *The Times* crossword, but the primary requirements are patience and determination.

It is no use being lured by a blank grid, reading the clues, getting nowhere, then giving up. But be warned — it is addictive, and the onset of "omnicruciverbivoracity" has been known to provoke the kind of obsessional behaviour that can compromise relationships and even careers. Luckily, most dedicated solvers and compilers are on the acceptable side of eccentric. What we all share is a fascination with problem-solving in general and linguistic coincidence in particular.

The crossword is intended to be solvable by a reasonably well-educated person (which I admit begs the question) without recourse to reference books, but everyone has gaps in their vocabulary and areas of inexpertise, including crossword compilers. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* has traditionally been our main justification for vocabulary, supplemented by *Collins English Dictionary*, particularly for proper nouns, although both contain much that I would be reluctant to inflict on the solver of the daily puzzle. Although regarded by some as their crossword "bible", *The Chambers Dictionary* is rarely needed and much more appropriate for harder puzzles such as the *Listener* crossword in *The Times's* Weekend section.

It is fundamental that a crossword clue will always contain a definition, in the form of a word, phrase or clause, which tells you the meaning of the solution to be entered in the grid. In a non-cryptic puzzle, that is all you are given — so faced with "Tree (3)" you will not be sure which one (ash, box, elm, fir, gum, oak, yew, etc) you are looking for until you get further help from a solution that crosses it. In this respect it could be argued that a cryptic clue is more helpful, because it would also give, either preceding or following the definition, some other kind of

indication — the main types of which are explored briefly below — of precisely what kind of tree is involved.

Whether jumbling, hiding, punning, reversing, subtracting or interpolating and so on, the writer of a cryptic clue will always say what is to be done, using a form of "verbalgebra" whereby unknowns are represented by synonyms, and the symbols consist of words or phrases which specify how to manipulate them. Where items are simply side by side, a verbal equivalent of "plus" or "equals" is strictly unnecessary but often enhances the misleading surface meaning of a clue. These cryptic instructions begin to leap off the page as a solver gains experience. The trick is to identify this extra information and interpret it, although of course the clue-writer may have gone to some pains to disguise what he or she is really driving at.

Anagrams

These are often a starting-point for new solvers, and although you will find no more than five or so in a crossword, they are often easy to spot because they will always be accompanied by a word which could imply some kind of jumbling process. In the case of the tree, "A tree has splintered (3)" tells you that the word "has" has been "splintered", ie, broken into small pieces, so it is an ASH that is required.

"Roast mules cooked in spring (10)" illustrates the clue-writer's primary rule, quoted in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*: "I need not mean what I say, but I must say what I mean." Forget some bizarre kind of barbecue early in the year; it is the letters of the first two words that have to be "cooked", ie, falsified, or treated as mere ingredients for processing. The definition of the answer, "spring", is used in the sense not of the season but of a kind of leap — a SOMERSAULT in this case.

Occasionally the apparent meaning is not so misleading. "Who could get harassed in the classroom? (12)" should be interpreted as asking what sort of person you could find if you "harassed", ie, muddled up, the letters in the words "the classroom", which by happy coincidence can make SCHOOLMASTER.

Hidden

The old chestnut "Capital of Czechoslovakia (4)" should alert you to the process of the theoretically simplest type of clue, where a word is hidden although it is before your very eyes (usually too easy for more than one per puzzle). OSLO is not in the country mentioned, but its letters are part of the word. Again, the clue-writer has actually told you that, while apparently suggesting something else. The solution may also span a space between

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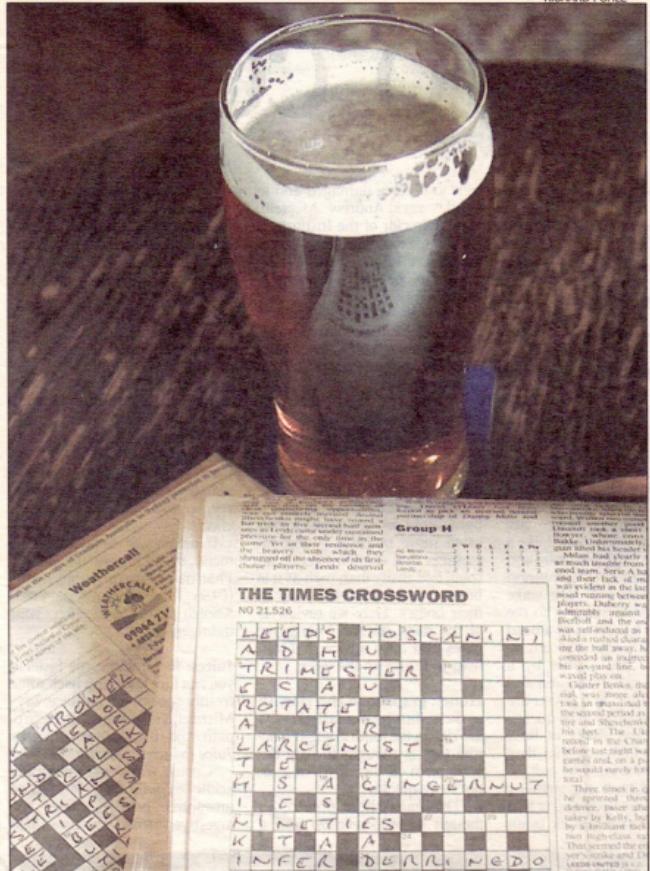
The writer of a cryptic clue always says, albeit obliquely, what is to be done

words: "Some mongrel managed to find a tree (3)", for example, specifies an ELM as "some", ie, part of the text which follows. In this case the words "to find" are simply there to form a neutral link between the extra information and the definition.

Two meanings

Simply giving two different definitions of a word can produce unexpected results. I would not dare to use "Easily aroused soft flesh (5)" in a puzzle — even an experienced solver might jump to the wrong conclusion — but the definitions are innocent enough when regarded separately. A QUICK temper is "easily aroused" and the "soft flesh" next to your fingernails is also QUICK. Using the neutral link "seen in", the clue "Tree seen in small enclosure (5)" identifies the tree as a BOX in this case, once you realise that all enclosures are not outdoors and that one kind is where a witness sives evidence in court.

Puns

Because the way to indicate their presence are fairly limited, puns, corny or not, usually stick out a mile.

"The type of tree you talked about (3)" is really far too easy for YEW, which sounds like "you" in speech, but using the same basic idea, the clue could be less obvious if "you" was defined rather than given say, "Type of tree second person mentioned?" (3)".

As with most cryptic instructions, the indication that a pun is involved may come before or after the word affected: "Composer's name heard (6)" leads to HANDEL, a pun on "handle", and "Heard composer's name (6)" is a pun on "Handel", leading to HANDLE, but "Composer heard name (6)" would be ambiguous. The "apostrophe-s" in the first two cases apparently implies possession but should be taken as an abbreviation of "is", used as a neutral link.

Reversals

The reversal of a word can be flagged in various ways, depending on whether the solution is to appear across or down — a point sometimes disregarded in other crosswords. Some such pointers, such as "over", are valid for both, since you can turn something over end-to-end or top-to-bottom, but "Fool backs into a tree (3)" for GUM, ie, "mug" backwards, would appear only as an across clue in The Times, whereas "Fool climbing a tree (3)", ie, "mug" upwards, would be an acceptable down version.

Out and In

Removing part of a word is another option for the clue-writer, but as always, the solver will be given an appropriate indication of what is going on. "Almost set light to a tree (3)" implies that you need almost all of a word meaning "set light to" to find the tree required, so take the last letter off "fire" and arrive at FIR. Since the same solution can be reached by taking "a" out of "fair", another straightforward clue to it could be "Just removing a tree (3)". "Just", of course, has to be interpreted in the sense of "reasonable", not "simply", as it might appear on first reading.

Although the device is more appropriate for longer words, "Is it all right to go round a tree? (3)" offers a simple example of nesting, as it were, one word inside another. The solver is being asked if "OK" round "a" makes a three-letter tree, which of course it does, conveniently completing the selection given above, OAK.

Most words, of course, are less co-operative than those above and require combinations of the techniques exemplified, interspersed with other devices such as abbreviations, the selection of particular letters using such pointers as "primarily" for first letters, and so on, but occasionally the definition may comprise the whole wording of a clue without any resort to bits and pieces — a traditional device. Many such clues are wonderfully succinct eg-incidental discoveries, instantly memorable and therefore unavailable for repetition until a new generation of solvers matures — eg, "Die of cold (3-4)" and "A stiff examination (4,6)", where alternative interpretations of "die" and "stiff" use slightly black humour to lead to ICE-CUBE and POST MORTEM. Others extend the coincidental double entendres with a hint of serendipity. "They tend to bring up unrelated issues (6,7)" may suggest people who go off the point in negotiations, but consider alternative meanings of "tend", "bring up", "unrelated" and "issues" — all legitimate — then consider the whole picture. FOSTER PARENTS fits the bill rather nicely, wouldn't you say?

Given that these notes are necessarily skeletal, complete beginners may be best advised to be as pig-headed as I was to start with and pore at length over comparisons of sets of clues with their solutions — you may take to it like a duck to water, but a sympathetic, patient and experienced friend is the best overall guide through the cryptic quagmire.

So where are these enigmatic soundbites we call clues gestated? Naturally, in the compiler's head — machines are splendid slaves for the donkey-work but the human brain is still essential to exploit the flexibility of the English language.

Traditional desks strewn with paper and dictionaries are still typical for compilers, with or without an attendant computer, but I prefer to abandon mine, once I have a filled diagram, for clueing in an environment where the results may well be tackled. If I can't invent a clue in the pub, how can I expect it to be solved there? My necessaries for work consist of a pint of beer, one tatty dictionary, and a kind of box on the wall which provides meaningless background noise to cover potential distractions. As a bonus, there are usually handy guinea-pigs willing to provide forthright instant feedback — those are my excuses, and for the time being I'll stick to them.

Test your wits with *The Times* Jumbo Crossword Page 11

Tomorrow

A brief history of *The Times* Crossword